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PERS. Col. Arthur SMALL
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Fliers' Backlash:

Colonel Loses Command

By Tom Lambert
Of The Herald Tribune Staff
WASHINGTON.

The commanding officer of the three American fliers shot down over Communist East Germany has been relieved of his command, sources at the Pentagon revealed yesterday.

At the same time these sources admitted that the airmen may have been lax in their navigation when they strayed over the Iron Curtain March 10.

The three fliers parachuted to safety after their plane, an RB-66B reconnaissance bomber, was shot down by a Russian MiG fighters. After vigorous official American protests and demands for their return, the Russians released one of the airmen March 20 and the other two last Friday.

Col. Arthur Small, commander of the 10th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Alconbury Air Base, in England, was relieved of his command 15 days after the RB-66B was shot down, Pentagon sources said. The RB-66B was part of the 10th Wing's 19th Squadron, which is based at Toul-Rosieres, in France. Col. Small has been replaced by Col. Dewitt S. Spain.

It was understood Col. Small's re-assignment from the 10th Wing to Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations at 17th Air Force headquarters in Ramstein, Germany, was made while Gen. Curtis Lemay, Air Force Chief of Staff, was on a European inspection trip.

Meanwhile, Pentagon sources said, preliminary interrogation of the fliers by American Air Force officers in Germany indicates one of the plane's compasses was not

working properly during the flight and that the airmen failed to use other navigation aids to check their whereabouts.

According to one unconfirmed report from another source, the fliers once told their ground controllers they were near or over the North Sea when they actually were nowhere near it.

The same source also suggested that ground control of the RB-66B during its flight was not satisfactory.

In its protests and demands for the fliers' return, the United States insisted the RB-66B strayed inadvertently into East German airspace March 10 and was not on an intelligence mission, as the Russians claimed.

When intelligence missions fail, the agents sometimes are blamed by their own governments as part of the "cover" story. But Pentagon sources yesterday to support the U. S. position that the RB-66B had strayed accidentally over the Iron Curtain.

The U. S. yesterday denied again the camera-equipped RB-66B was taking photographs when it was shot down. That charge had been aired in the Soviet propaganda press.

"As far as I know," a State Department spokesman said, the plane "was not" taking pictures.

The spokesman added that the plane "was out of contact with the United States Air Force" when it was downed. According to some unconfirmed reports, ground controllers tried to recall the RB-66B as it approached East German airspace, but the crew did not respond.

The State Department has received copies of some reports of Air Force interrogations of the three RB-66B fliers, the spokesman said. But he declined to say anything about the reports.